European journal of American studies

12-4 | 2017
Special Issue: Sound and Vision: Intermediality and American Music

"Talking 'Bout My Generation": Visual History Interviews—A Practitioner's Report

Wolfgang Lorenz

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12423
DOI: 10.4000/ejas.12423
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Wolfgang Lorenz, « "Talking 'Bout My Generation": Visual History Interviews—A Practitioner's Report », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 12-4 | 2017, Online since 28 March 2018, connection on 25 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12423 ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.12423

“Talking ’Bout My Generation”: Visual History Interviews—A Practitioner’s Report

Wolfgang Lorenz

1. Oral and Visual History

1 Oral history, in a modern sense, is about 100 years old. The first to mention the term, and practice it, was Joseph Ferdinand Gould, a Harvard educated eccentric and Greenwich Village bum on the brink of madness. Gould claimed that he had written down everything he had overheard in subway trains, on “EL” platforms, in Bowery flop houses and in Harlem. “I imagine that the most valuable sections will be those which deal with groups that are inarticulate such as the Negro, the reservation Indian and the immigrant. It seems to me that the average person is just as much history as the ruler or celebrity,” he wrote to the Harvard historian George Alfred Sarton in 1931.

2 After Gould’s death in a mental hospital in 1957, the whereabouts of his *Oral History of our Time* remained shrouded in mystery. No-one can say with certainty that his *magnum opus* ever existed. Although Joe Gould’s oral history accounts were not filmed or audio recorded, but written down, they are considered to be influential historical antecedents of today’s form. “His early belief that oral history was a way to document the lives of everyday people… animates much 21st century oral history practice” (Oral History Association).

3 While mostly unknown in Europe, oral history still flourishes in the US. For anyone unfamiliar with the concept, this is how the American Oral History Association (OHA) defines the term:

> Oral history refers both to a method of recording and preserving oral testimony and to the product of that process. It begins with an audio or video recording of a first person account made by an interviewer with an interviewee, both of whom have the conscious intention of creating a permanent record to contribute to an understanding of the past. (OHA)

4 Though conclusive and adequate, the definition provided by the OHA sees oral history only as a vehicle leading to a better understanding of the recent past. This is but one part of the full picture. Because the OHA does not distinguish between audio and video recording, it fails to acknowledge that the visual aspect of an oral history interview opens up a second layer of meaning that is significant. Facial expressions and gestures also reveal meaning, not only what is being said. More often than not a flicker in the eye, or an agitation during a narrated passage supports, underlines, and emotionally verifies what is being communicated.[1] The addition of the visual dimension to the rulebook of oral history interviews in which voice and gestures are necessary constituents to the reading of the material would lead to an "intermedial" history and enrich the informative value of the discipline.

5 Oral history would therefore not just contribute to a better understanding of the past, but also to a better understanding of the interviewee. Put simply: It would help the recipient get to know the narrator as an individual. This is an eminently relevant aspect whether the person interviewed is well-known in their field or not.

6 Oral (and visual) history[2] is a purely academic subject of the social and history sciences, which is in many respects very similar to librarianship with a few TV and radio production skills thrown in. It rests on the threshold between journalism and academic research. From its practitioners it requires meticulous research capabilities, empathy, curiosity, patience, and very good organizational skills. Although it may sound dry and unsexy as an academic discipline, the *OHA* alone lists 52 affiliated centers and collections in the US. Arguably the three most prestigious Oral History research centers and collections are located at the Columbia University in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, and the University of Southern California, which houses the Shoah Foundation, established by Hollywood film director Stephen Spielberg. From 1994 to 1999 the Shoah Foundation videotaped, catalogued, and indexed a monumental 52.000 interviews with Holocaust survivors, yielding a spectacular 120.000 hours of interview material. The Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, as it was formally known, permits many universities around the globe online access to its archives, among them the Freie Universität in Berlin.

7 Oral history archives cover a large array of topics associated with newer socio-cultural and political developments. They are mostly arranged mono-thematically in content, dealing for instance with the Civil Rights Movement, the women's movement, the lesbian and gay movement, and the migration to the northern states or trade unionism to name but a few. Archives or research centers dealing with musicians are relatively rare in comparison. This might come as a surprise given the impact of American popular music in the last 100 years. Two of those are worth a mention. Their subject matter is Jazz, America's classical music.

8 The Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutger's University in New Jersey is probably the more prestigious of the two. It has a collection of 120 oral histories of pre-Swing and Swing Era Jazz musicians—the "most comprehensive and widely consulted body of Jazz oral histories in the United States" (Rutger's University website). For the interviews, taped between 1972 and 1983, the musicians had to be sixty years and older. They range in length from 5 to 35 hours and are accompanied by typewritten transcripts. "The interviews have been consulted by hundreds of scholars and writers producing articles, books and dissertations, in addition to frequent use by producers of radio and television,"

the Rutger's jazz center proudly claims on its website. It was founded in 1972, and its director of many years was Dan Morgenstern, the renowned jazz historian and a former editor of *DownBeat, the prominent American music magazine dealing with jazz and blues music*.

9 The Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program in Washington DC, the second important archive of its kind, "has documented more than one hundred senior jazz musicians, performers, relatives, and business associates" (Smithsonian website). Unfortunately the collection consists of audio-recordings only, each of which was conducted by a "jazz authority" and has an average length of six hours.

10 But what about the music that came after Jazz? What about Rhythm and Blues? No systematic approach to archiving R&B[3] after WWII has as yet matured into anything remotely resembling the depth and scope of the collections of the two organizations mentioned above. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, claimed to have started an oral history project in 2015, but has been remarkably quiet about this subject ever since.

11 The reasons why academia still seems to shy away from R&B in general and oral history accounts in particular are twofold. Ever since Adorno, the mass medium of popular music has suffered from a severe image problem in academic circles, based on a deep distrust of anything that is openly commercial. From its beginnings around 1900, popular recorded music has always also been a commodity. If you wanted to own it, you had to buy it. It was produced, packaged, marketed, distributed, and promoted by corporations which specialized in selling recorded music. As the English scholar and music critic Simon Frith points out, "twentieth century popular music means the twentieth century popular record" (Frith 12).

12 Secondly, music is a non-verbal means of communication. To address it adequately is difficult in text based academic courses. Foot-tapping culture remains a contested area for scholars, although the situation has considerably improved in recent years with a new generation of academics.

13 There are good reasons, indeed, why this popular American art form should not be overlooked as it carries unusually strong political, economic, and cultural traces of what Stephen Greenblatt calls "social energy" (Greenblatt, 6). After all, the political and social turmoil of the time had a profound effect on and was reflected by popular music, especially of the 50s and 60s, and most revealingly so in the lyrics and music of Rhythm and Blues. "It is important to recognize that r and b, although it is rooted deep in the particularities of the African American experience," Brian Ward points out, "had a phenomenal capacity to move hearts, minds, feet and other extremities, irrespective of race, class, gender, religion or nationality" (Ward 8).

2. Reading Interview Material

14 Versatile interpretative approaches to "life stories," as oral history accounts were also labelled, have been developed by social scientists and historians. These provide the methodological backbone which helps us 'read' personal narratives as narratives "beyond the individual story" (Maynes, Pierce, Laslett 131). In this context we should consider "stories as evidence about how individuals are embedded in personal, social and political relations within the constraints of their particular cultural and historical contexts" (129).

As we shall see later in the text, we will have to add to this the manifold production processes of the post-war American record industry as well.

15 Unfortunately, life stories are also subjective and memory can produce flawed, imprecise and unreliable accounts of the past. This aspect in particular has led to skepticism about the accuracy of those narratives in the community of scholars trained in analyzing precise empirical data. And surely this needs to be addressed. Personal life stories can never be the only true version of what happened because they are tainted by personal objectives. However, as the authors of *Telling Stories* argue, "the value of personal life narratives is related precisely to their tendency to go beyond the simple facts. They tap into the realms of meaning, subjectivity, imagination, and emotion" (Maynes, Pierce, Laslett 148). In other words: They deliver a personal or human dimension that would have been lost otherwise. However, to understand them, they need to be "read" in their historical context.

16 The following sound bites, recorded between 2004 and 2008, are part of a series of filmed "visual history" interviews with some of the most iconic artists, producers, musicians, recording studio owners and music managers in the history of recorded music. They cover the period of the 40s, 50s, and 60s of the last century and touch on topics such as the post-WWII migration of southern African Americans to the cities of the north, racism and segregation in the rural South, the origins and characteristics of the black musical idiom, or the erosion of the power of the black pulpit. All interviewees were older than 60 years of age.

17 The choice of interviewees was guided by the intention of producing a documentary film about the independent years (1947–1967) of Atlantic Records, a record label which was by some measures the most influential of all independent recording labels and by all measures the most successful. Every person videotaped was connected with Atlantic Records in those years as an artist, producer, owner/manager, or songwriter.

18 As disappointing as it may sound to some, American popular music history cannot be retold, or seriously analyzed, as a constant succession of artists and styles alone. Just as relevant in the creation of music are the many facets of the industrial production process —the division of labor in the music industry. Put succinctly: "The industrialization of music cannot be understood as something which happens to music, since it describes a process in which music itself is made" (Frith 12). Like Simon Frith, I would also argue that any understanding of American popular music is impossible if not all the 'players' representing the value chain of music making are represented and the geographical, social, cultural or historical context in which they operated is addressed.

19 I shall therefore introduce each of the following five video sound bites by Ben E. King, Jerry Wexler, Solomon Burke, Jimmy Johnson and Joel Dorn[4] by providing a short descriptive biographical section. Apart from providing telling insights into the history of American popular music that should be fascinating, among others, for scholars of American culture, they also give a more detailed glimpse of the advantages of intermedial video history narratives. Unfortunately, a critical and systematic academic approach or tool kit for this is, as far as I know, still not available. The suggested interpretations are therefore subjective and, to be honest, informed more by enthusiasm than by method. Developing this method would make for a promising research topic.

3. Ben E. King (1938–2015)

20 Quite unlike the singer Solomon Burke, who carried the designation "King of Rock and Soul," or James Brown, who called himself "King of Soul," Ben E. King cheekily chose an aristocratic stage name to start with. In contrast to the elaborated stage antiques of his two contemporaries, who laid bare their souls on stage, he thought of himself as an entertainer and interpreter of songs in the vein of Nat "King" Cole or such like.

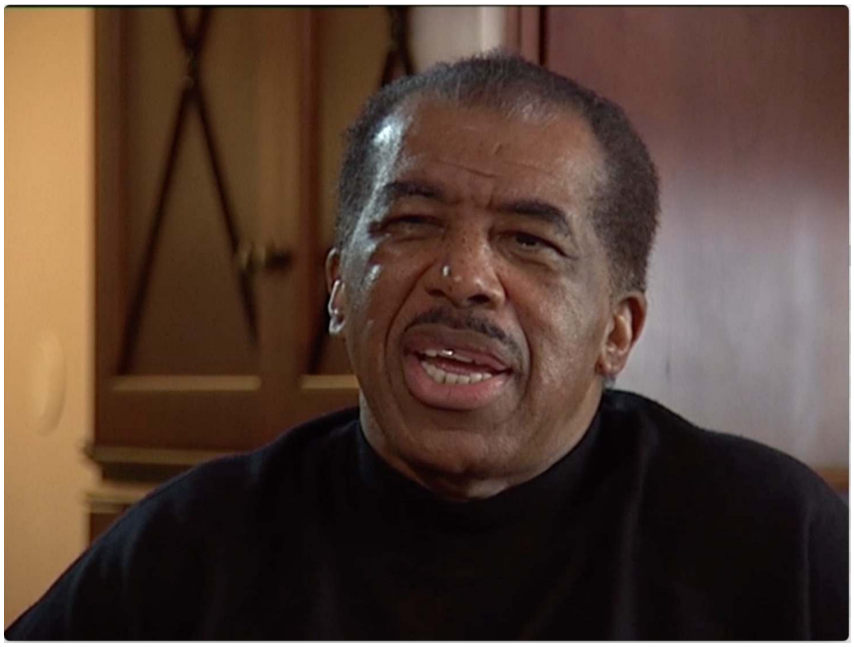
21 King was born Benjamin Earl Nelson in rural Henderson, North Carolina in 1936, the oldest of 8 children. Until he rejoined the rest of his family in New York, to where his father had moved "to look for a better life,"[5] King was raised by his grandmother. "The thing that we did the most was in and out of church almost 7 days a week," he remembers in my 2004 interview with him. Like so many black performers of his generation he started singing in the gospel choir of his local church.

22 Coming to the big city was at first a frightening and disorienting experience for King. Adapting to the new situation was not easy, and not without grave mistakes. The still naive country boy from the Carolinas stumbled into potentially dangerous situations: "I've met pimps, I've met hustlers, I've met killers—I mean legit killers, contract killers—I've met these people, I've shook hands with them."

23 Eventually King started to acclimatize to the rougher edges of big city life and joined a finger tapping, tight harmony singing Doo-wop group. The 1950s "revealed a process perceived by many blacks to be the dawning of a new era of black opportunity," says Brian Ward (59). Its main musical expression was the vocal group sound of Doo-wop that for a short time reflected the experiences of black migrants in the big cities of the north. What also emerged was a new value system towards white cultural norms. King, who would eventually become a member of the prominent vocal group *The Drifters* and gain lasting international fame as the singer of "Stand by Me," amplifies these new values when he says: "For most whites, the epitome of what could happen to them in show business was to reach Carnegie Hall. For most blacks, the epitome of what could happen to you was to reach the Apollo. Once you played the Apollo, that was it! To hell with Carnegie Hall!"

24 In the following excerpt, King talks about his first meeting with the Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler, the white owners of Atlantic Records.

> My first time walking in there was my first time meeting Jerry and, er, Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun. It was strange because I was just standing there looking at two guys that owned the building. I say, 'Whoo, I'm impressed with these guys—they own the building!' [Laughs]. My father just owned one little restaurant and they own the building! [Laughs]. And, you know, and then too, you have to allow for the fact that I'm coming still—I still have that Henderson, North Carolina, mentality. It took me the longest to still be able to stand and look directly into the eyes of most whites.



Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/

25 The authors of *Telling Stories* quite rightly point out that "if personal narrative analyses are to be of interest... they must go beyond the individual and grapple with issues of generalization" (Maynes, Pierce, Laslett 128). Reading the soundbite this way, what historical generalizations are in evidence? What does it tells us about race in 1960s America?

26 Without going into too much detail or stating what is so blatantly obvious, we are transported back into the time of the Civil Rights Movement when black men, especially in the South but also, albeit in a weaker form, in the urban centers of the north, had to hide behind a "mask of deference" (Estes 1), and most whites refused or were unable to see African Americans, as Ralph Ellison describes in *Invisible Man*. King still remembers those restrictions. But he remembers them as echoes of the past due to a new concept of racial self-assertion and self-esteem acquired on the streets of New York City where newly acquired social skills had weakened that "North Carolina mentality" of subservience and social exclusion. The terror that once must have been so strong is now subdued, but still very much in evidence for King—and the viewer.

4. Jerry Wexler (1917–2008)

27 Born in 1917, Wexler was the son of a Jewish window-washer. He was raised in Washington Heights, "a lower middle class enclave of Jews, Italians, Irish" (Wexler 3) in New York. His mother Elsa, a communist, had big dreams for her son: he was to write the Great American Novel. To her disappointment, however, Jerry was a "wayward youth," spending more time in poolroom establishments than in school. (He finished a university degree in journalism much later). Early on he became fascinated with Jazz music and started to hang out in the Harlem Jazz clubs of the immediate post-renaissance years and on 52nd Street in Manhattan, the Jazz mecca of New York. He also started collecting Jazz records—and an all consuming passion for black music began to emerge that would shape his subsequent life. As a journalist for the music-industry trade paper *Billboard* in the

early 1950s, he suggested renaming *Billboard's* chart for black music from "race" to rhythm and blues chart, thereby inventing the term rhythm and blues which from then on became the new designation for African-American popular music.

28 In 1953 Wexler joined Atlantic Records as a partner. Perhaps the best record producer America has ever seen, he produced Ray Charles, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin. He did not care much for *The Beatles,* whose music he thought derivative, and he did not like the white rock bands that had joined the Atlantic label in the late 60s. To him *The Rolling Stones* and *Led Zeppelin* were "rockoids." Wexler was a self-professed "soul man" who had the ability to "connect with a soul singer like no-one else could," as Ben E. King claimed in my 2004 interview. Under Wexler's guidance Atlantic became the main provider for raw and fiery Southern Soul music provided by the Stax studios in Memphis and, later on, from Muscle Shoals.

29 In the middle of the 1950s, as a young man, Wexler was a frequent visitor to the numerous music venues that had sprouted up in Harlem between 110th and 136th street during the so-called Harlem Renaissance. This is what he remembers most:

> Before Rock'n' Roll and even before the very beginning of Rhythm and Blues back in the thirties you would see all the great jazz performers there: Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Bessie Smith. You would see the great dancers. It was a period of great elegance. It was just a little after the Harlem Renaissance but there still was a spillover of these great performers. They had great orchestras that you would see there: Jimmie Lunceford, Don Redman, Fletcher Henderson. And there were certain songs. The Apollo [Theater] had a theme song called 'I may be wrong, but I think you're wonderful' and when you heard those strains, you know, there was an instant association with the whole culture. [Wexler sings]. And then there were the after hours places. The clubs in basements and so on where musicians would come to jam. The jam session is more or less forgotten. Musicians don't do that anymore, as far as I know. But back in the day they would get together after hours and play together for pleasure and the playing was all improvisation and they had the great tenor men the great trumpet players, the great piano players. You had the great stride piano players of the day such as Fats Waller, James P. Johnson, Willy 'The Lion' [Smith].... and they would have, what you called cutting contests. One man would sit down and show that what he was putting down was much more effective than the next man or the prior man. And by mutual consent a winner would be declared. It was a contest without any animus....
>
> The other thing in Harlem was there were certain places where they had ethnic food such as barbecued ribs done southern style. There was a comic [comedian] called Eddie Green, a negro comic, and he owned three of these rib joints. And when you went to one of these places which you would do after the *Apollo Theatre* or after *The Savoy*, when you were hungry, you could order a side of ribs, barbecued ribs and a choice of two out of three vegetables: cole slaw, potato salad or what we used to call rhythm and blues spaghetti. It was canned spaghettis. 35 cents for everything.

Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/

30 Although in this sound bite only present in "animus," Wexler was a man of difficult words. "He lived on the American dictionary, using 9 $ words or 12 $ words or 25 $ words" remembers Jerry Leiber, of Leiber and Stoller, the eminent rock and roll songwriters, "and took every opportunity to display his tremendously impressive vocabulary."

31 But this is not really the decisive point here. What we see is not only the revered record mogul Jerry Wexler but also an actual eye-witness of the Harlem Renaissance. In 2004, when the interview was recorded, it was already next to impossible to talk to such a person. This is a marvelous peep through a 'window' that was slowly but surely closing. We also come to understand where Wexler's fixation with black music originates from, and that there always has been a deep but seldomly investigated connection between R&B and soul food. (But that's for another essay.)

32 Jerry Wexler was one of the iconic producers of American popular music and he was well aware of his status. In a recording industry that was at the time full of conmen and hucksters, he was a rare individual indeed—a street savvy intellectual with a great business sense. He had a reputation of being a witty conversationalist and was a spokesperson for all questions concerning African-American music. He knew he was a legend and you can see in the clip at hand that he tried hard to satisfy expectations. I think, he "overacted" a bit when he started to intone the Apollo song, but who is complaining when you have the chance to record an eye-witness of the Harlem Renaissance and the producer of Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin and Bob Dylan on videotape?

5. Solomon Burke (1940–2010)

33 Burke was one of the most colorful music performers in show business blessed with a voice of treacle and hellfire. Some critics called him the best soul singer ever. He was also a church minister and a gifted business man. He called a chain of mortuary institutes his

own, and yes, Burke had sold popcorn in the intervals of his own concerts back in the 60s, as legend has it. He purportedly had also fathered 21 children.

34 Jerry Wexler called him "wily, highly intelligent, a salesman of epic proportions, sly, sure footed, a never-say-die entrepreneur" (Wexler 150). Solomon Burke was rather modest when he referred to himself as being "a minister first, then a father, and then an entertainer." In 1961, he was the first black performer who had a hit record with a Country and Western song, "Just Out Of Reach." Ray Charles' "I Can't Stop Loving You," often credited with being the first, was released a year later.

35 Until he died at the age of 70 on his way to a concert in Amsterdam, Solomon Burke still released highly acclaimed records.

36 The next sound bite mixes the personal, anecdotal, and historical. Burke's statement echoes a time when R&B was still labeled "devil's music" in the black community, when the markets for selling records were regionalized and even the radio stations were segregated.

> *Just Out Of Reach* was recorded, it was given to me because I think we made a mistake. We told Jerry Wexler that we couldn't be classified as Rhythm and Blues and we would have to be classified as something else besides a Rhythm and Blues artist because of my commitment to the ministry. And he looked at us and said: 'Are you crazy, we are the biggest Rhythm and Blues label in the world. This is it! There is no other, we're rhythm and blues.' We said, well, we have to be something else because it's not gonna work for the church. He said: 'Well, you figure some, come back and let me know. You don't need these songs, these great songs that I've got from all these people. You come back and let us know what you're gonna do.' He was a little aggravated. When we came back he gave us four Country and Western songs. [Smiles] You know it was like the kiss of write-off.
>
> Next thing I know when they did release *Just Out Of Reach* we couldn't get airplay because there was no format for a black artist singing country music in America. No black disc-jockey would play it because it didn't fit their rhythm and blues format. The white disc-jockeys couldn't play it because there was just no such thing as a black country artist. So it became an amazing feat. I didn't even have a picture then. So then it became a point of putting my picture on a placard. One place in Florida, in the Everglades in Florida, thought I was Salome Burke. They thought I was a chick with a heavy voice. It was an amazing time. *Just Out Of Reach* was a fascinating time for us to learn about the different areas where we could perform, where the record was a hit. Basically in the south, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, you know, all those areas. Oklahoma, Texas. It was just a huge record for us.

Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/ *©Poparchive GmbH. All Rights Reserved*

37 Not all oral history interviews are about honesty or truthfulness. Sometimes they just visually play back and verify what we already knew about a person. Burke was a larger than life artist. He might have been the first one who managed to become a brand. Larger than life is how he wants to project himself in an interview situation as well. His delivery is faultless, he never loses eye contact with the interviewer. We see him sitting on a throne-like armchair, not dissimilar to the actual throne he used during his concerts. Is he sincere or just acting? It doesn't really matter. He performs and entertains in any situation and knows that this is expected of him. This interview was a slick performance indeed. What you see is what you get.

6. Jimmy Johnson (born 1943)

38 Jimmy Johnson was born into a musical family. His father Ray was a semi-professional country musician about to gain wider recognition but chose to opt out of the music business and work at the *Reynolds Metals* plant in Muscle Shoals instead when he started a family. "Dad had bought me a trumpet and I joined the Sheffield Junior High School band," Johnson recalls, "but that wasn't my instrument and I quit the band. Later, when I heard Chuck Berry, I wanted to play the guitar."

39 Muscle Shoals, a small town at the north-western tip of Alabama was not exactly a music mecca before Rick Hall's *FAME* studios brought some attention to the area. A budding musician had the choice of going to Nashville, the center of Country and Western or to Memphis, which was home to Rhythm and Blues and, ever since Elvis Presley had started his career here, to Rock and Roll.

40 Johnson decided on a career as a R&B musician because he "didn't want to work in a shoe store" and eventually became part of the four piece *Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section, an all white musical setup.* In the Southern states a recording studio was perhaps the only place with permeable racial boundaries and in these surroundings Johnson played rhythm guitar on some of the great recordings of all time, including Aretha Franklin's "I Never

Loved a Man the Way I Love You," Wilson Pickett's "Mustang Sally," and "Hey Jude," Bob Seger's "Old Time Rock And Roll," and the Staples Singers' "Respect Yourself" and "I'll Take You There." As an engineer, Johnson recorded Percy Sledge's "When A Man Loves A Woman," and the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" and "Wild Horses."

41 The following soundbite is, superficially read, quite humorous. Johnson remembers a day in the studio with Jerry Wexler, the Atlantic owner, who was known for his violent temper and for exchanging musicians who would not or could not play what he, the non-musician, had in mind. That Johnson can remember this at all points to the actual feeling of terror he must have felt when Wexler recorded with him.

> One time he came up to me and said: 'Jimmy, Jimmy Baby, can you give me a little giggy, giggy, gongy, gongy.' I thought to myself: Giggy, giggy, gongy, gongy: my ass, I can't believe this, what the hell is that. And I'm saying, well, this is it for me I guess, and so I didn't do giggy, giggy, gongy, gongy because I didn't know what the hell he wanted, but I had another lick in mind and I said: 'Jerry what do you think about this lick," and I started playing it.' He said: 'Jimmy I like that!' And I wanted to get down on my knees and thank the Lord right at that moment.

Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/ *©Poparchive GmbH. All Rights Reserved*

42 This is a good example of cross-referencing sound bites. It tells us as much about Wexler, who could be a fear-inducing presence, as it tells us about Jimmy Johnson, who was just plain scared. In oral history we always have to contend with the notion that memory can be faulty and misrepresentations of the past can be used to aggrandize the present. You only have to look into the eyes of Johnson to see that he is being very honest here.

7. Joel Dorn (1942–2007)

43 Joel Dorn "got hooked to black music," he said, the day he heard *Ray Charles* for the first time on the radio in his hometown of Philadelphia. Since Charles would not have been available in the white downtown record stores, he had to venture into the black suburbs to find his records. The music of *Ray Charles*, he claimed, changed his life. When Dorn was 19 years old he became a jazz disc jockey at *WHAT-FM* in Philadelphia, choosing David

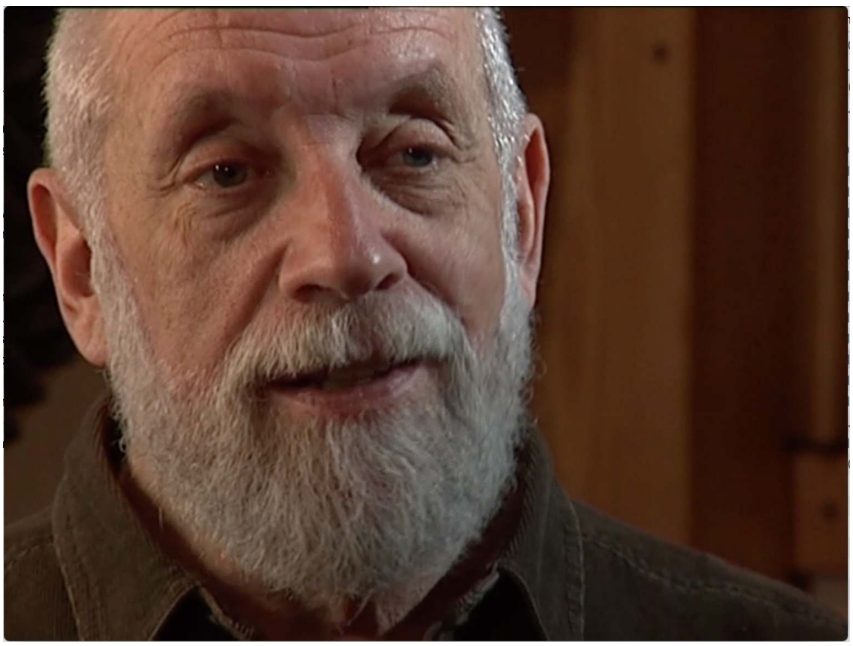
"Fathead" Newman's "Hard Times" as his signature tune. Newman was a member of the *Ray Charles Band* then.

44 From 1967 until 1974 Dorn worked for Atlantic Records as a jazz producer. There he supervised recordings of Max Roach, Yusef Lateef, Willy DeVille, the Neville Brothers, Herbie Mann, Les McCann, Mose Allison, Jimmy Scott and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Dorn also discovered Bette Midler at a gay night club in New York City.

45 As producer of Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly With His Song" and "First Time Ever I Saw Your Face," Dorn won two Grammy awards in 1972 and 1974 for single of the year.

46 Here Joel Dorn talks about a night out in the dark heart of Harlem with his friend King Curtis, the famous Atlantic sax player, session musician and arranger.

> One time Curtis picks me up after session. When I first came to New York, you know, we would go and hang out. He would take me uptown, I would meet his friends. There was a whole other culture uptown, the nightlife crowd, you know, all kinds of characters: numbers writers, hookers and gangsters, musicians, bartenders —it just was a another world—and regular people too. And I kinda knew that scene from Philly but Philly was not New York. It was a much expanded, much more glamorous version of a little scene I'd known in Philly. So one night he picks me up after the session. Says: 'Do you want to go uptown?' It was great. I always loved going up there with him. Because he was like royalty in Harlem. You came in with King Curtis, you came in on a good ticket, you know.
>
> So we go to what looked like an abandoned neighborhood and we walked to this building, I got scared. 'Where are we going?' And there was a big metal door and there was a big metal guy in front of that door. And he goes 'Hey Curtis' and we went in. And what it was, it was a place where they cut drugs. And there were these old Cuban women, smoking cigars, with no teeth. And they would have like the heroin over here and the coke here and the cut over here. And they had these screens, like on a handle, like very fine screening and they would pick up a little bit of heroin, flip, pick up a little bit, a lot more cut, flip. They really knew what they were doing, because everything was white. If you made a mistake, you know, you can make a ten-thousand-dollar mistake. So these women really knew what they were doing. And they would cut it, other people would bag it. A real factory, you know. I had never been at a place like that.
>
> So he calls me over and he takes the pick of his finger and he dips it I think it was heroin first, I mean, the head of a pin. He says: 'Stick your tongue out.' Puts the finger on my tongue with the heroin on it. Says: 'You got that taste?' I didn't get high, you know, I got scared. So I said: 'Yeah, I got that taste.' Then we hung around for about a half hour, forty-five minutes and then we went over there where the coke was, cocain. We did the same thing. [Puts his finger to his tongue as before]. 'You got that taste?' I said, 'Yeah.' I didn't know what was going on. [Pauses] He said: 'Never get involved with this stuff, but if you do, always taste it first. Do you remember the taste of the first one and the taste of the second one? If it doesn't taste like that don't touch it.' I thought that was one of the wildest, sweetest things anybody had ever done. You know, he was kinda saying, 'it gets tricky where you're playing.'



Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/ *©Poparchive GmbH. All Rights Reserved*

47 This is the best anyone can ever hope for in visual-oral history and a wonderful case study for intermediality. Dorn is a master of his craft. What we have here is a most fascinating example of cinematic storytelling. He conjures up images of places and people with amazing rhetorical athleticism and harnesses all his narrative skills to illuminate Harlem and the counter-culture of the 60s. The composition, the use of direct speech, the characters, the rhythm, and the denouement. It is all meticulously crafted and delivered with elegance and authority—a marvelous morality play, which must be seen for best effect. Now watch again!

8. Coda

48 The uses of oral history interviews are naturally not only confined to the walls of learned institutions as research and/or teaching material for lectures and seminars. When produced professionally, the material is also the perfect basis for TV or film documentaries as the recent Jim Jarmusch film about Iggy Pop, *Gimme Danger (*2016*)*, shows. Still, in times when every project needs to have a marketing plan and is strait-jacketed into gain and loss cost analysis, an argument based on worthiness alone will not suffice. Collecting cultural memory is an almost impossible selling proposition. Often the "problem" is solved by the interviewees themselves. They die and slam the window to the past shut forever. This has already happened to most musical personnel of the 50s and early 60s.

49 Only recently, Hua Hsu in the *New Yorker* (July 24, 2017) maintained that oral history as a basis for biographical literature has these days become "the preferred format for revisiting the recent past." This is good news.

50 Meanwhile, seeing those people talk leaves most students and academics spellbound. They want to see more. Collecting hard facts might be more scientific, but it is not as humane. History, music history, is created by people, why not let them talk about it.

Every interview not conducted is a wanton destruction of (African-American) cultural memory.

51 But what good is it talking about music? Can words swing? Can the sound and vision of interviews convey music? Listen and look carefully, I think they can, and do.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

All interviews were conducted by myself in 2004 (Ben E. King, Jerry Wexler and Joel Dorn) and in 2008 (Jimmy Johnson and Solomon Burke). Link: http://www.ru.nl/nas/research/video/sound-vision/ *©Poparchive GmbH. All Rights Reserved.*

Secondary Sources:

Estes, Steve. *I Am A Man: Race Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.

Frith, Simon. *Music For Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988. Print.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearian Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.

George Sarton Additional Papers, 1901-1956 (MS Am 1803.4) Houghton Library, Harvard University. Print.

Guralnick, Peter. *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999. Print.

Hsu, Hua. "Stir it up." *The New Yorker* 21 (2017): 56–61. Print.

Lepore, Jill. "Joe Gould's Teeth." *The New Yorker* 21 (2015): 48–59. Print.

Maynes, Mary Jo, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett. *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History.* London: Cornell UP, 2008. Print.

Oral History Association. Accessed 21 Jan. 2018. Web. http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations.* Berkley: U of California P, 1998. Print.

Wexler, Jerry, and David Ritz. *Rhythm and the Blues: A Life in American Music.* New York: St. Martin's P, 1993. Print.

NOTES

1. One of those emotionally revealing moments occurred during my interview with Ahmet Ertegun, the Chairman of Atlantic Records, in 2004. While most of his answers seemed to be routine, when he talked about the label's first hit record, *Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee*, he suddenly

became agitated and it seemed that he was caught up in his memories. For a moment he was no longer the 81 year old grey eminence of the American recording industry but the young and eager Ertegun of 1949, who was very relieved indeed when his fledgling company on the verge of bankruptcy was finally saved by a successful record.

2. Oral history is the generic term referring to all such interviews. Visual history, or oral visual history, is videotaped oral history. The differentiation is important as many interviews in this field were recorded with audio equipment only.

3. R&B is used as a generic term for all music based on this form, for example Rock and Soul music and to a certain extent even some forms of Country and Western.

4. The process of choosing who I would include in my list of interviewees was not an easy one. I finally decided to go for originality, compendious brevity in content and, naturally, performance. No-one likes to listen to a boring soundbite.

5. All the following quotes from King, Wexler, Burke, Johnson and Dorn are from interviews conducted by myself. Please see also the Works Cited list.

ABSTRACTS

The critical appreciation of videotaped oral history interviews has been hampered by one-dimensional interpretations of the spoken word alone. The addition of the visual dimension in which voice and gestures are necessary constituents to the reading of the material has so far been widely ignored. Unjustly so, because it enriches the discipline with new interpretative approaches that can lead the way to a more human evaluation of historical events and personalities, thereby enlivening the dry facts that empirical historical sciences usually provide. The article will endeavor to describe what we see when we listen, and how this visual component can enhance informative values. "'Talking 'Bout My Generation'" discusses these aspects in connection with African American culture and music. The following sound bites are part of a series of videotaped oral history interviews with some of the most influential artists, producers and music managers in the history of recorded music. Historically, they cover the period from the 30s to the 60s of the last century. Featured is hitherto unpublished interview material of the soul singer Ben E. King, the Southern musician Jimmy Johnson, the record producer Jerry Wexler, Solomon Burke, who needs no introduction, and Joel Dorn, the wonderful former jazz producer for the iconic Atlantic Records label.

INDEX

Keywords: oral visual history, intermediality, African American performance culture, racism

AUTHOR

WOLFGANG LORENZ

Wolfgang Lorenz is Senior Editor Film and Text at facts and fiction GmbH in Cologne. After his MA in German, English, and American literature at the Justus Liebig University Giessen, he has

been a lecturer at many European universities including Southbank University in London, Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften Hamburg, the University of Bonn, Humboldt University, and Freie Universität Berlin. He specialized in music and business journalism working for various international magazines and media including Forbes and Stern, ZDF (Mainz), European Business Channel (Zurich), or VOX (Cologne). He is the founder of Poparchive GmbH, Hamburg, and producer of a documentary film on the US label "Atlantic Records," best known for its numerous recordings of rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and jazz.